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The Homeless

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THE HOMELESS

BY KRIS FAWCETT

The night was cold here on Stormstill Cliffs, and I huddled deeper into my cloak to ward off the chill air. The bones of the wild dog I had killed this morning lay picked clean beside me, and I knew that despite my meal hunger would soon be biting at me again. Three days on the run is enough to exhaust even the fittest of Lords, and my undersized stable-hand's body, never too strong to begin with, was rapidly nearing the point of complete exhaustion.

I stared into the fire before me, feeling its heat on my face and hands. Tired as I was, I fought the temptation to let my eyelids droop and lose myself in sleep. Whatever happened, I must not fall asleep, not at this point. For had I not just this day seen Lord Ranek and his men?—oh, far off in the valley, mere specks in the distance, to be sure, but on my trail nonetheless.

I felt relatively safe up here, at least. Even had they seen me and taken after me up the cliffs at sunset—as I was almost sure they hadn't—it would take them all night to reach this point on horseback. And by then I would be long gone.

To keep awake, I turned my back on the fire and looked out over the cold moonlit waste far below me. I shuddered to think of crossing that Desert alone, even by night. But cross it I must, else give up and be killed or, worse, taken back to the Hold.

A night-wind came whistling dry and cold off the sands, through the rocks. Almost it seemed to be calling my name... "Cheraan, Cheraan the Lost..." calling me onward and, perhaps, home. The sound woke a great loneliness in me, and involuntarily my thoughts turned to the Hold, where lay the only past I had, and to how all this running and coldness had begun...

It began five days ago, when the capture of Arsheelah, a princess of the Winged People, had been announced to the Hold. A great stir of excitement had run through the people. A princess of the Saliin, captured by Lord Kenalt, and in the walls of our Hold! The Overlord Karstak would be well pleased, for this was the chance he had been waiting for—a foothold, a bargaining point with which to force the Saliin to give him back those lands rightfully his.

I heard the news only indirectly, by overhearing one of the grooms telling another, for no one speaks to Cheraan the Homeless unless to give an order. Even the lowliest of the scrubbing-boys feels it beneath him to talk with a foundling, an outsider, origins unknown, who is only suffered to live within the great Hold because he has a body strong enough for work. I sometimes wonder what would have happened had it been a girl baby they

found outside the Hold walls that night some nineteen years ago... At any rate, when I heard the news I paused in my tasks and shook my head. Far from being pleased at the news, I was apprehensive. Why was the Overlord so certain that the Winged People would bargain? What made him think that this would not be the final outrage, the spark to set off that war which had long been simmering, ready to explode, between the Hold and the Saliin?

A whip came from nowhere and landed on my neck, warning me to get back to my work. As I bent to shoveling the foul contents of the floor into a sack, neck smarting, my apprehension turned to a fierce hate for these Holders, this cruel barbarous people who showed so little regard for personal rights or decency. Let the war break out! May it do so, and may their accursed Hold fall to ruins before their eyes, and may they be slaughtered to the last man! And I among them, for death would be better than this life of living in, among the Holders, outwardly no different from them, yet for a quirk of birth forever condemned as an outcast.

I snarled a curse under my breath, and the nearest groom looked at me queerly. I don't think they considered me capable of intelligent speech, so little did they care to find out, much less political thought. So much the better for me, I've often thought. The less they know about Cheraan the Homeless, the less they have to use against me. So much the better. And I turned to shoveling the floor with a new and savage quickness.

They built a cage for her and dragged her through the city.

I saw her when the procession passed the stables. She was lovely, long red hair and deep green eyes. But her gown was torn, and there was an ugly bruise on one cheek. The Hold-Lords are not known for their mercy towards captives.

As the cage was drawn past our stables on her way to the palace to be interrogated, I saw her suddenly rouse from her half-stupor, straighten and shake her fist at the jeering crowds that lined the streets. Her great white wings unfurled proudly as I heard her defiant shouts:

"By the Gods, you will all die for this!" Her eyes blazed and for a moment, as she passed, they met mine. I felt a sinking inside, a shame to be part of this crowd even though I stood mute. "By the Talisman, you will pay—" But her brave shout was cut off as a rock hit her on the forehead and stunned her into silence. Then the cart was pulled along out of sight, and she was gone.

The Talisman...her words sparked a memory. When I was young, an old kitchen

maid, the only friend I ever had at the Hold, once told me of an old legend about the conflict between the Hold and the Saliin. "It is said," she had whispered to me one night, "that the ancients of the Saliin, their forefathers, foresaw this coming war. And so they made a plan for the salvation of their people. They forged a Talisman--naught more of it is known than its name, the Talisman--and set it in a far and magic place. And it is said that when the time is right, a great leader will arise to lead the Saliin to victory. And they shall know this leader because he alone will possess the Talisman."

A child's fable, I thought now. Even so...that could be the answer to why war had not broken out before, despite the Hold's countless raids on Saliin land. Perhaps they were waiting for the Talisman to reappear... But useless speculation earns only blows from the stable master, as I had found, and so I resolutely went back to my work.

That night I made up my mind to help her. I don't know why I thought that I, lower than the lowest scullion, could help a royal prisoner, but something in her gaze had awakened a great need to see her, talk to her. Perhaps I could comfort Arsheelah with words, if nothing else.

I stole away to the palace. By a series of miracles I avoided being caught time after time, until finally--greatest miracle of all--I stood outside the window of her cell on the ground floor. I was just about to call her name when a voice spoke roughly from within.

"You fool!" I recognized the outraged voice of Lord Ranek, head of the guards. "You miserable fool---you killed her!"

Shock ran through me. Dead--the princess? Why?

"I didn't mean to, your--" The whining voice of the guard was cut off by the sharp sound of a blow.

"I don't care what you mean, you son of an earthworm! You've killed her! Do you know what this means?" Ranek's voice shook with fury. "You'll pay for this with your life! The price of your lechery will be your head!" He spoke to someone else. "Torkul, inform the Overlord of this blundering. But hark--be mindful to whisper it low. If this news gets out and back to the Saliin, it's war for sure. And we are not ready for that--not yet. So make sure no one knows of this--on pain of their life, and yours!"

A sudden movement I made must have betrayed me, for Ranek was at the window in an instant. He spotted me already running, and I heard him shout for the guards to stop me. But it was night, everyone was half-asleep, and I had a head start. By fortune I was out of the palace, across the city, and climbing through a small hole in the Hold Wall I knew of before they could catch me.

So here I was, huddling in the moonlight on Stormstill Peak three days later, a hunted man.

It was strange, I thought, that I was important to so many now who hadn't

known I existed before--

The sound of voices below me snapped off the thought, and I whirled around. Ranek! Could it be possible that the hunters had made it up here after all, while I sat and daydreamed like a fool?

As if to answer my thought, there was a sudden shout below, a cry of "There! On the peak!" followed by the splintering sound of an arrow striking rock. They must have seen the smoke from my fire--I cursed my stupidity and darted behind some boulders, trying to see just where they were.

More arrows rained about me. From their position below me I knew they were shooting blindly, trying to frighten me into giving myself away. I was still unseen, then, if only for--

An arrow whizzed past, missing my left ear by a matter of inches. Involuntarily I jumped, and turned to see it embedded firmly between two boulders just behind me. I shivered and was about to move out when something caught my eye. Moonlight was glinting on something metallic, something caught between the boulders below the arrow. Despite my danger I was curious; I felt drawn to the object, whatever it was. I cautiously fished the thing out from the rocks--

It was an amulet, suspended on a thick silver chain. It was angular, squarish, worked of silver hammered flat and inscribed with odd runes. And in the center was set a magnificent amber topaz, glittering cold in the light of the now-risen moon.

Instinctively I reached to caress it, and I remembered from nowhere the childhood legend. I whispered the thing's name--

"The Talisman."

And with the speaking of those words a spell was completed, and broken. Somewhere far in the night the machineries of magic were set in motion. There was a deep humming all around me, then a great flash of purple light. And when my eyes cleared again I stood up, and saw that from my shoulders there stretched two magnificent white wings!

I stood straight and tall in the moonlight, holding the Talisman aloft and knowing, with beautiful clarity, the perfection of the Elder Ones' plan, of my heritage. I saw how each part fitted together, how my own part as a changeling--not a foundling!--had fit in, how none of it could have been any different than it was. The Leader!--and what a leader, one who knew his enemy intimately, knew how he worked, his strengths and weaknesses. What better background for master strategy?

With a deep sense of joy, awe and reverence for the Elder Ones, I beat my Saliin wings solemnly, twice, in the night air.

A sound behind me startled me. It was Lord Ranek, silhouetted against the great moon, standing not a hundred yards away. Swiftly I tucked the Talisman into my loincloth, unfurled my wings and beat them, testing their feel once more. Then, with a mighty leap I launched myself off

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arms for a hug. A serene young face framed by auburn hair peeped down from the loft.

"Nicholas! You're home," and Cynthia Silverseed, sixteen years old, came lightly down the ladder in her night-robe. Marjorie sighed and turned away to count the coins.

"Tell me all about Castletown," smiled Cynthia, drawing her brother to a seat by the fire. "Have you had your supper?"

"Aye," said Nicholas, "I ate at the Puss and Fiddle in Knobbles, and rode home with Bacon Davies after."

Marjorie looked up. "Did you stop by?" Her look said plainly that that being the case, his lateness was forgiven, but Nicholas shook his head.

"I'm to stop there tomorrow," he said, and seeing her expression, added, "before I leave again for Castletown. I'm going up to take service with the king."

"With the king!" exclaimed

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Cynthia, "whatever for?"

"The bard is dead," answered her brother, "and since Martin will not compete, I am going up. No doubt Oliver will be going too."

Marjorie stared at him across the table. "And what are we to do without you for the next six months?"

But Nicholas had been steeling himself for this. "Richard already does better than I in the field; and I'll send down my earnings as they're given to me. The purse from the Three-Gold Feast is still untouched," he nodded toward the cupboard, "and this is a fair amount here." He indicated the little heap on the table. "And you shall have Noggin, for I'm going to walk this time."

Marjorie considered. "'Tis a good decision," she said at length, "and you may go. I could no longer stop you if I wished it--your birthday falls tomorrow, and your father's legacy," she continued dryly, "shall go with you."

She swept up the coins into her apron. "You've done well for once, Nick."

It was the closest thing to a compliment that Marjorie had ever given him, and Nicholas smiled to himself as he began to undress for the night. A fretful wail from above sent Cynthia up the ladder again to poke her head through the trap.

"Hush, darlings, hush now. Jennifer, can you settle them? 'Tis only Nick returned from Castletown."

Nicholas listened fondly to the cosy sounds of home: the gentle hiss of embers smooored for the night; the low voice of his sister calming the twins; the faint creak of wood as Richard and John shifted about in the bed near the fire. Tomorrow he would leave all of this behind, perhaps forever. He slipped into bed beside his brothers and shut out the future in the warm silence of sleep.

TO BE CONTINUED

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the cliff's edge and into the air. I, Cheraan the Leader, sailed glorious and free on the night wind, down into the valley, across the desert, toward Saliinhar and home.

Lord Ranek stood silently and watched Cheraan go, gliding like a bird set free. Then, his eyes still on the retreating figure, he spoke quietly to his horse.

"Well, Windswift, there he goes. Our job is done, old friend. Our part in the plan is fulfilled; now all that remains is to wait for the war, for the end. I wonder how he feels?" Ranek nodded after Cheraan. "Does he still hate the Hold? It's no easy thing to be a changeling--as I well know--and worse to be one but not know it. Is he bitter?" The horse whickered softly at his side.

"And I wonder how much of the plan they saw fit to tell him. Does he know of me and my part as guardian and guide? And when the war comes and the Hold is destroyed, will he look upon me in anger, will he kill me as an enemy, or will he know me as a friend?"

Ranek smiled and patted Windswift's neck. "I know, it doesn't matter. The prophecy has been fulfilled, and my part is at an end. All that remains is to go back to the Hold, to play this role to the end. But it would be nice to know..."

"No matter." He mounted his horse and turned to go down to where his men waited. Before he did, he turned around for one last look at Cheraan, a speck of whiteness now in the distance. He raised his hand in salute.

"Farewell, my countryman." And so saying, Lord Ranek headed back down the trail from Stormstill Peak, down and into darkness.

THE BLACKNESS IS DARK

By Michael M. Levy

Imagine, please, a lightless, cold world,
A dark, wooded world of somber green,
Whose crooked boughs are forever swirled,
By a gale that's felt, but never seen;

A many hilled land that hangs in place,
(Above and below, a void of stars)
A brooding island in untracked space,
The brutal, empty blackness, it mars.

Its edge is at the crumbling earth's end,
A place to see eternity from,
And underneath black, knarled roots descend,
Some hanging forlorn, or dead, and some

Twisted about, by that same wind blown
That tears and shakes the trees up above,
A frigid wind that does shriek and moan,
As a damned soul lost and without love.

Here I came in the dark of my time,
When my soul was parched and without hope,
But no saving Virgil could I find
To lead me from hell, up despair's slope.

I wandered dark woods, and saw no light,
Found nothing, ate Despair's bitter fruit,
Chased after shades, from shadows took flight,
And lost all my joy, my voice gone mute...

